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ABSTRACT

This conference presentation examines features of Superstart Plus, an inclusive New York City program designed to serve the diversified population of preschool students with special needs. Superstart Plus is designed to provide a less restrictive environment for preschoolers with mild, moderate, or severe disabilities, by placing them in general education settings for half-day or full-day programs. Classroom ratios, curriculum development, and scheduling follow developmentally appropriate practices, and an enrichment-based model geared towards child-initiated learning is used. The paper describes the program's history, goals, design, case studies, staffing, parental involvement, professional development, and relationships with staff and peers. Appended to the paper are charts showing staffing patterns for various models of Superstart Plus, daily schedules for full-day and half-day programs, and a list of the learning centers used. (JDD)

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Diversity in Inclusive Early Childhood Programs in the City of New York

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Abstract:

To properly service the diversified population of students with special needs in the early elementary grades (preschool through second grade), we need to tailor our inclusive programs. We will examine the programs currently in operation in several New York City school districts. Various programmatic structures and features will be reviewed.

Program Description:

Superstart Plus is a high-quality inclusionary preschool program, that provides an opportunity for disabled and non-disabled preschoolers to grow and learn within the same environment.. Currently, the program is being piloted in 13 of the 32 school districts in New York City, with a total of 22 participating schools. Seven districts follow a full-day inclusionary model (Model A), and six others use a half-day model (Model B). Our district, Community School District 7 (CSD 7) in the Bronx, follows a Model C,with a full-day schedule for the students with special needs, half the day spent in an integrated setting,the remainder of their day in a self-contained, intensive setting. A more in-depth view of these three models may be found in Appendices 1 - 4.

Superstart Plus History:
CSD 7 is located in the South Bronx in New York City. The city is divided into five boroughs that contain 32 school districts. The city services approximately one million students. Our slice of this Big Apple consists of approximately 13,000 students in CSD 7. More than 2,000 of these receive some form of special education. In addition, services for high school students with special needs and students of all levels with severe disabilities are regulated by programs from Central Headquarters.

The South Bronx is an impoverished area with a multitude of problems such as inadequate housing, drugs, and crime. Six out of ten infants born in one of our local hospitals are HIV positive. Although this is an area with many problems, we have many dedicated professionals, parents, and community people who collaboratively work to meet the needs of the students.

Superstart Plus is a city-wide companion program to New York City's already existing Superstart program. Superstart provides quality education for prekindergarten general education students who live in impoverished areas such as the South Bronx. It served approximately 10,000 children in the 1992-93 school year. When the integrated, special education component is added, we label the program Superstart Plus. This pilot program is now in its third year. Both Superstart and Superstart Plus are direct outgrowths of earlier programs in our city that also addressed the needs of "at risk" (but not necessarily " with special needs") children. These programs were known as as Head Start, Giant Step, and Project Child.

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In response to federal legislation P.L. 99-457, as well as the New York State Education Department mandated Chapter 243, Superstart Plus was born. The former is a provision stating that, beginning July 1991, special education services must become an entitlement for all eligible three-and-four year olds. The latter mandates two specific components for such programs: evaluation and instruction. Due to this legislation, CSD 7 submitted a proposal to the State Education Department entitled Project Hope. This project was designed to be a therapeutic, nurturing program for prenatally chemically exposed children with disabilities. These students were to be integrated into the already existing Superstart program at two Bronx sites. Concurrently, the Early Childhood Office of the New York City Public Schools developed a similar proposal with two varying models. All three models were combined to form Superstart Plus.

Superstart Plus Goals:
This program is designed to provide a less restrictive environment for preschoolers with mild, moderate, or severe disabilities. It nurtures their strengths and adapts instruction, and the environment, to their special needs. This environment needs to supply a positive, high-quality early childhood program for students both with and without disabilities. The students' strengths and needs are assessed within a developmental context. The program makes the entire school community--teachers, parents,and even the disabled and non-disabled youngsters themselves--more aware of each student's potential. This, in turn, fosters a positive view of each student's individuality and develops growing relationships. Superstart Plus also lays the foundation for ever-expanding inclusionary programs throughout the grades.

General Program Design:

Superstart Plus is truly inclusionary. The students with special needs anonymously spend a half-day or full-day in a general education setting. The students are usually placed in a school in their neighborhood, making the setting is even more natural. The schools these students attend are most likely the schools that they, their siblings, and their friends will continue to attend. Along with their general education peers, they eat in the school cafeteria, attend assemblies, and explore the neighborhood. These children are truly part of the "mainstream."

This program follows the guidelines set out by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Classroom ratios, curriculum development, and scheduling are shaped by standards known as Developmentally Appropriately Practices. Traditional "special education" practices are used only if they conform with these principles. Teachers are facilitators rather than models for imitation. This enrichment-based model is geared towards child-initiated learning. Natural curiosity is developed mainly through a variety of ever-changing learning centers (see Appendix 9).

In addition, all city-wide initiatives are incorporated into this program. When necessary, a bilingual or English as a Second Language component is made available. Spanish is generally the second language. However, at one Manhattan site, seven different languages may be found in one classroom. New York City classrooms also incorporate a multicultural curriculum, Superstart Plus being no exception. A variety of cultural influences are reflected in literature, art expression, and cooking experiences. Themes are an integral part of lesson planning, and reflect the children's continually changing needs. Themes may include the physical senses, neighborhood experiences, or the development of a sense of responsibility.

Pre-reading skills are developed through the Whole Language Approach. Once the students have created a painting, a sculpture, a building, or a puzzle, an adult may interject with a language-provoking question or statement.. "Tell me about this," or "How did you do this?," are two of many examples. Once the children's responses are written down to see, they are encouraged to "read" it back to the adult. Through such exercises, the students begin to develop a love for reading, as well as an appreciation for its real uses. Paper and writing utensils are abundant throughout the room to expedite "invented" writing.

The school system provides all the students with breakfast, lunch, and snack (preschool only). Each school has a medical staff available, and some sites provide a full health clinic. Well-care services are available as well as treatment for illness.

The Children:

Students with special needs may display characteristics such as autism, speech and language impairment, emotional disturbance, medical or physical impairment, developmental delays, mental retardation, and/or prenatal drug exposure. These disabilities range from the mild to the severe. Children with special needs may be either three or four years of age. This allows the younger participants to remain in the program for two years if necessary. Their placement into Special Education is initiated by the legal guardian, pediatrician, or any authorized adult. The Committee for Preschool Special Education then evaluates these children, and develops Individualized Educational Programs as necessary.

The general education population must be four years of age. These students are screened and admitted to the Superstart program if found "educationally deprived." They must live in the school's home district, unless there is additional classroom space available. Many disabled and non-disabled youngsters alike live either with foster parents, or in homes where the caretakers have former and/or ongoing involvement with substance abuse. In addition, cases of various forms of child abuse are investigated annually. Each year, a small percentage of the general education students are referred for special education evaluations.

Case Studies:

On opening day of our first semester of Superstart Plus, a small, thin boy stood at our classroom door. His gaze was directed downwards, and he chose to remain silent when spoken to by an adult. He and three siblings had spent the last year in foster care with a loving family. This boy's natural mother had used crack cocaine frequently during her pregnancy with him, and there were reports of on-going abuse. When they were very young, their mother had abandoned them for days at a time, leaving them alone in the apartment. The children visited her at the foster care agency, but her attendance was sporadic. These visitations became a source of emotional upset to the children. Our student had been found to be developmentally delayed in speech and language skills. He entered the classroom, and proceeded to appropriately use a variety of materials independently. When other children were present, he interacted with them verbally and physically. But when a new adult approached him, he would stop all activity, look down, and refuse to answer. Slowly, over the next month or so, he began allowing the staff to help him and to speak with him. He disliked physical contact as well as speaking upon request in a group. As the year progressed, it was if a rose bud slowly opened. With lots of patience and persistence, this silent boy became a leader both in the intensive and integrated setting. He began accepting (and even liking) affectionate gestures from adults, and he often spoke out during group meetings. His intelligence and sense o f humor

became quite apparent, and he charmed many staff members and students alike. At the the end of his first school year in Superstart Plus, he was decertified from special education to general education, entering regular kindergarten that following September. He is now in first grade and doing well academically and socially. His foster mother has filed adoption papers for all four children, and expects to be successful in this endeavor.

During our second school year, a boy with a similar background displayed quite different behaviors. His natural mother likewise had binged on crack cocaine during her pregnancy with him, but he was immediately placed in foster care with his maternal grandmother. He continues to reside there with two older siblings. This boy presented himself as friendly and outgoing from the start. It was a month or so into the semester when difficulties arose. He became frequently oppositional, refusing to partake in many daily activities. He often fought physically with his peers over materials or activities. His opposition to staff became increasingly violent. His reactions included cursing, threatening, kicking, throwing objects (including furniture), scratching, punching, biting, and running away. We attempted to place him in a more restrictive setting, but there were no seats available at that point in any Bronx or Manhattan sites. Using a very clear and definitive behavior modification program, we began to see small changes in his behavior. We used both token economy and social reinforcement systems. The frequency of his threats and violence decreased, as well as their intensity. He began using overplayfullness (refusal through laughter, rolling around on the floor, or running away) as an alternative. We supplied him with alternative actions and verbalizations, and he began using them. By year's end, he continued to display oppositional behaviors, but the difference was clear. With fingers crossed, we placed him into the least restrictive special education environment in our school for that following September. The first month or two were questionable, but with some reshuffling of classrooms, he now functions very well in a class of 15 students and two staff members.

This school year is less than half complete, but progress in a certain case is already evident. A very petite three year old came to us, basically unintelligible. Her natural mother also abused crack cocaine neonatally. Fortunately, this girl was taken into foster care immediately after birth, and is now an adopted member of that family. The same is true for two her siblings. This girl attempted to use one or two word phrases, but we often did not have a clue as to their content. She often communicated to us that she needed to use the bathroom, but when we brought her there, she began screaming wildly, scrambling to get out. Her adoptive mother was not sure what caused this behavior, especially since it was not observed at home. Due to her fear, we originally did not force the issue, but she would end up having toileting accidents. This would also cause her to become very upset. So, by kindly, but firmly, assisting her to use the toilet when necessary, she has now mastered her fear. Concurrently (coincidentally?) the clarity of her speech and length of utterances have greatly improved. She has become quite a social butterfly in a short time. We expect only continued improvement.

Staffing:

Within the integrated classroom setting there are at least four licensed professionals. The base staff consists of one Early Childhood Teacher, one Special Education Teacher, one Early Childhood Educational Assistant, and one Special Education Educational Assistant. An additional assistant may be present should any particular student need extra assistance, such as students who are medically fragile. Support staff includes a family assistant (who maintains the parent program), social worker, teacher specialist and coordinator, speech therapist (bilingual, if necessary), a counsellor (if necessary), occupational therapist (if necessary), and School-Based Support Team for continued evaluation.

All support service providers who deal directly with the children, "plug-in" rather than "pull-out." They come into the classroom to provide the services, usually during learning center time, when the students choose their activities. The therapist may help the children with a cooking activity, or dress-up with them in the neighborhood area. The counseling, speech therapy, and/or occupational therapy is woven into the child's concurrent activity. In this manner, both the teachers and therapists learn from each other, and the non-mandated students benefit from the therapy as well.

Parental Involvement:

Superstart Plus incorporates a strong parent component in its design. The staff are encouraged to visit students' homes, and parents are encouraged to visit student's classrooms. In fact, parents (and all caretakers) are transformed into classroom volunteers whenever possible. Once they have spent some time in the classroom, they become familiar with the program's philosophy and acquainted with their child's peers. A "family room" supplies a relaxed environment where the parents meet, share ideas, and attend weekly workshops. Workshop topics may include curriculum development, domestic violence, and nutrition. All caretakers are encouraged to partake in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of their child's education.

Professional Development:

A thorough, well-defined calendar of professional staff development is written into the program's charter. The staff meets for one or two full, pre-service training days before school begins in September. Thereafter, one full day of training occurs each month. These are non-attendance days for the students. In addition, several full and half training days are interspersed throughout the school year, according to the Central School Board calendar. Topics may include evaluation and record-keeping, the Whole Language Approach, and Multicultural education. All classroom and support staff attend. Additional time may be allotted for home visits, parent conferences, child study, attendance at special conferences, and interschool visitations.

Getting Along:

A variety of relationships develop between all the children, regardless of label. Through their exposure to the general education population, it was hoped that the children with special needs would enhance their social, language, and cognitive skills. Happily, it can be reported that not only was this premise correct, but that this enhancement is a two-way street. The presence of those with special needs create an awareness of each student's individuality. The existence of everyone's strengths and weaknesses becomes apparent--and less painful. A child with emotional disturbance has been known to settle arguments among peers, due to his own practice with self-regulation. Those with speech and language impairments often supply others with newly acquired vocabulary. Freedom of movement between the learning centers allows for development of new friendships and ideas. Pairs of more capable and less capable students may be encouraged to work together by the staff. More importantly, the attitudes and actions of the adults sets the stage for acceptance of all students. It is very important to make no differentiation between the children. Both sets of children should be part of a whole, known as "our children."

The staff must also accept each other's differences, and show it. Teaching styles and/or classroom management skills may cause friction. Communication is the key. Teachers and educational assistants must constantly communicate through formal and informal meetings. The co-teaching staff must also make time for such discourse. Meetings may take place during teachers' preparation periods or over shared lunches. Brief discussions

can take place throughout the day. The more the adults communicate, the smoother the program's flow. Successful discussions usually include positive remarks and compliments, as well as constructive criticism. Teachers should share the lead in the classroom during group meetings and storytimes. The educational assistants should likewise share responsibilities within the learning centers and with special projects. A classroom where the adults "go with the flow" sets the stage for cooperation among the children.

Strategies That Work:

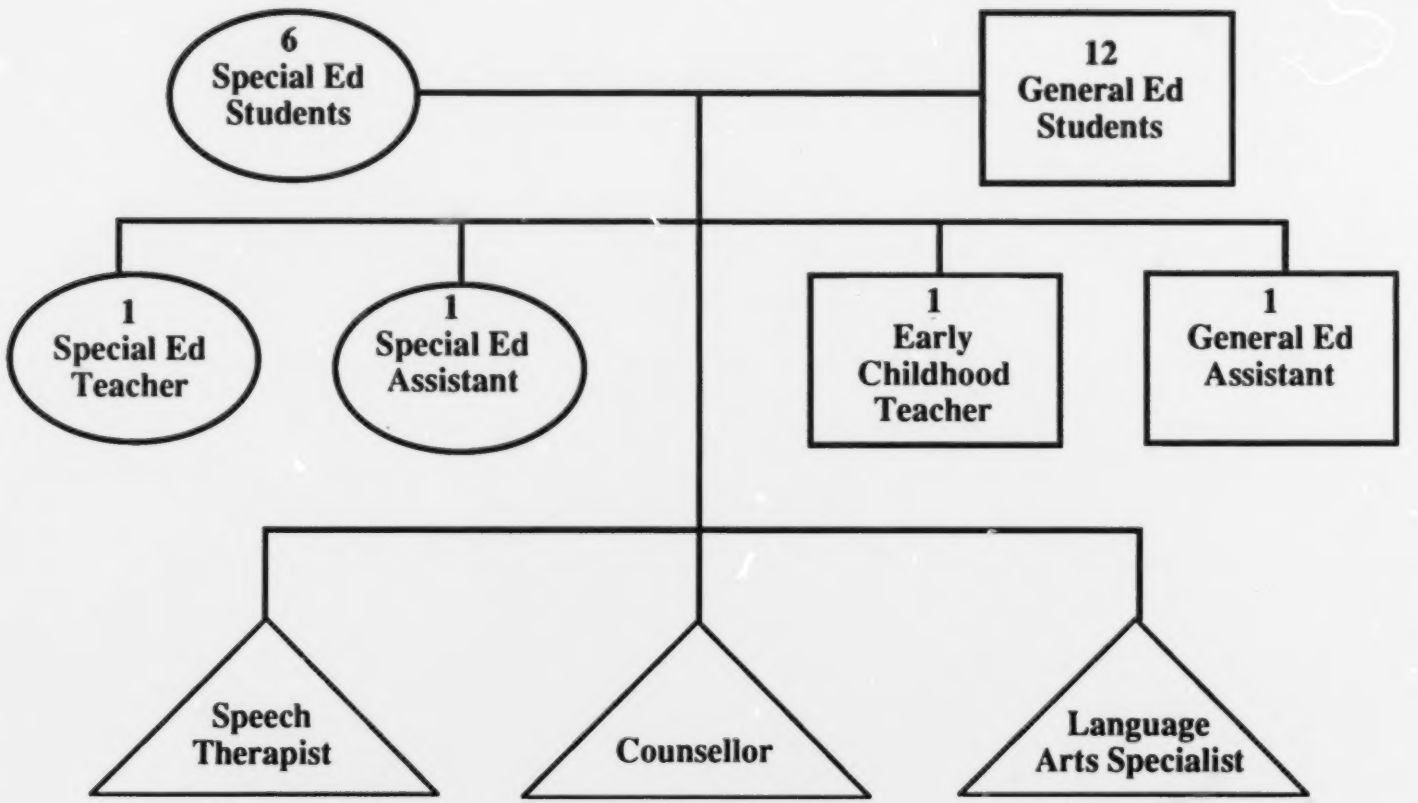
Providing an adult: child ratio of 4 : 18 allows for a greater chance to consistently use methods that allow for a smoother operation and a more stimulating environment. Daily or weekly jobs may be assigned to some or all students. "special assignments" may be used as reinforcers for those with behaviorally difficulties. The "rules of school" should be clearly stated and reviewed often. They may be posted in the form of dramatically enacted photographs. The use of the positive form of a rule is always superior, i.e., "In school we share our toys," is much better than "We don't snatch." Consistent review of the daily routine, and sticking to it, allow the children to anticipate activities. This may allay some behavioral difficulties. Again, photographs may be taken of each activity and displayed on a timeline. Transitions may be made easier with several warnings as to time remaining, visual cues (flashing of overhead lights), auditory cues (ringing a bell or singing a special song), assignment of pertinent jobs, and well-planned follow-up activities.

The program encourages the use of self-regulatory skills when dealing with behavioral issues. The adult may intervene, without taking over, by supplying the students with alternate statements and/or behaviors within a given situation. If two children are involved in a tug-of-war with a toy, the adult might model several solutions. Suggestions might include, " Perhaps you could offer to give the doll to him when you are finished," or "Why don't we find another activity until she is finished with the doll." The idea is to include the children in the outcome, so that they eventually deal with similar situations independently. Children may also be encouraged to air feelings by saying, "I don't like that," or "I get angry when that happens." Staff should also model and encourage student peers to share positive thoughts and compliments throughout the day.

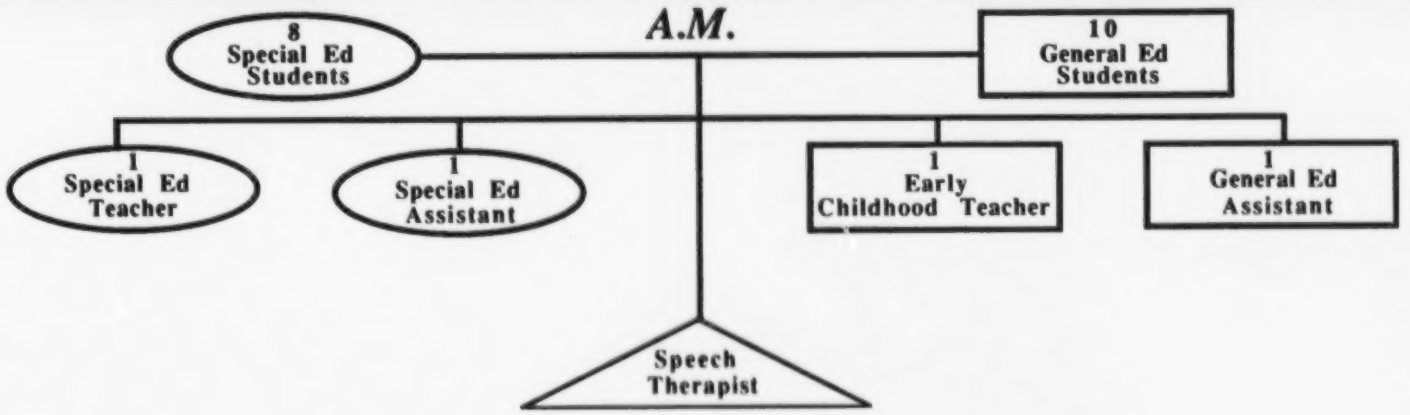
Conclusion:

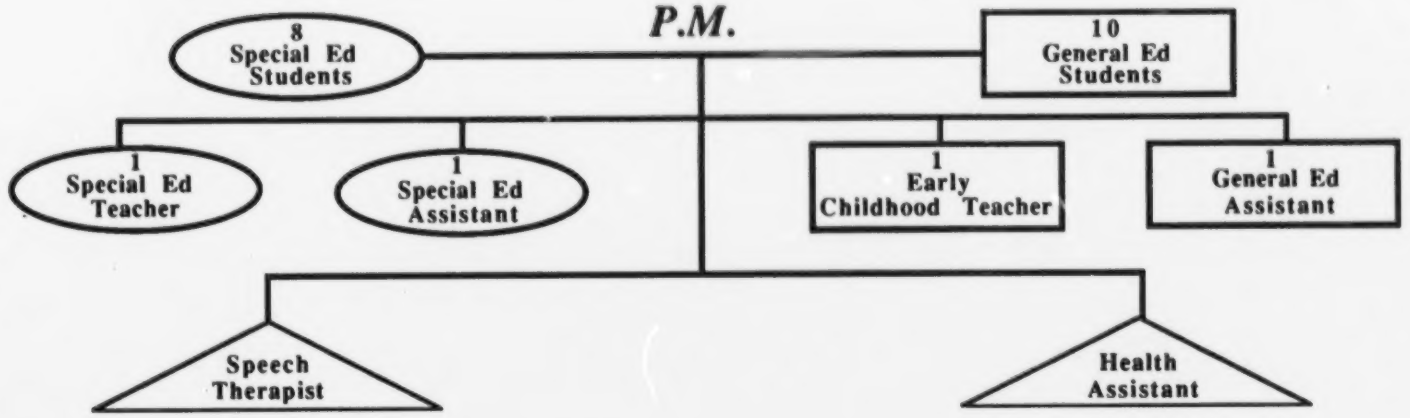
Now in our third school year, it is clear that Superstart Plus is a success. Within these past two years, CSD 7 has recommended that roughly 34% of the children in Special Education be decertified into the general kindergarten population. Several more have been recommended for our inclusive Kindergarten Plus. This program mainstreams students with disabilities into a regular kindergarten classroom. Twelve schools, in eight different school districts, boast an in-place Kindergarten Plus classroom, which is a full-day inclusionary program. An additional four school districts, with a total of seven such classes, enjoy the presence of First-Grade Plus programming. The Board of Education of New York City plans to move such inclusionary classroom settings up through all elementary grades, and perhaps beyond. On all educational fronts, inclusion appears to be the direction special education is going, and beginning at the early childhood level has proven to be a "super start" as well as a "plus."

Model A - Full Day Inclusive



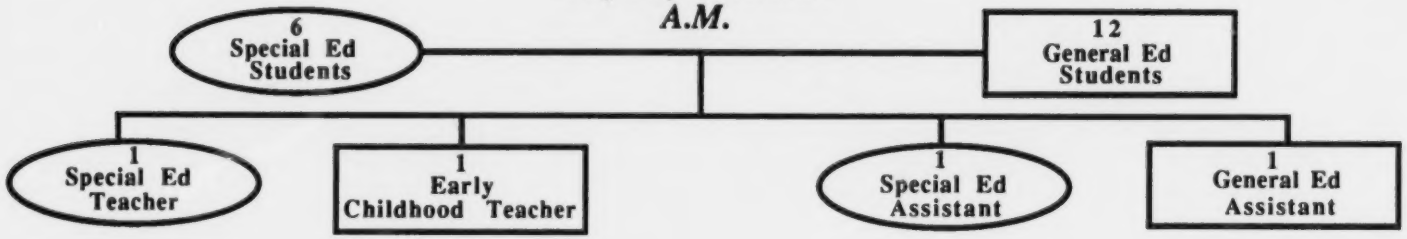
Model B - Half Day Inclusive

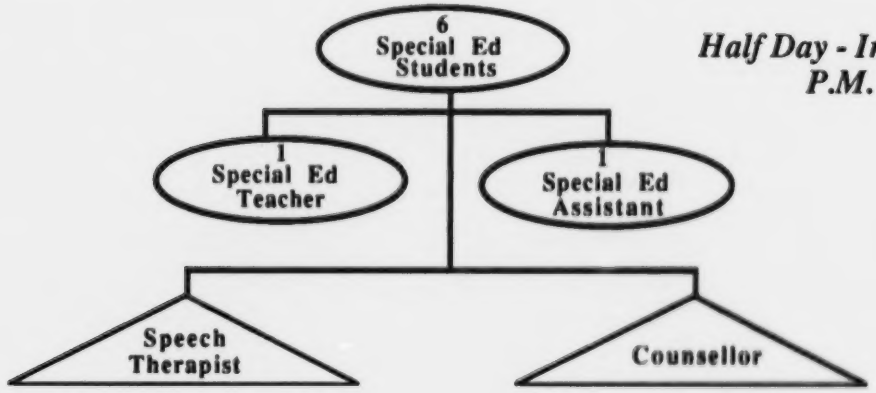




Model C - Monolingual

Half Day - Inclusive
A.M.

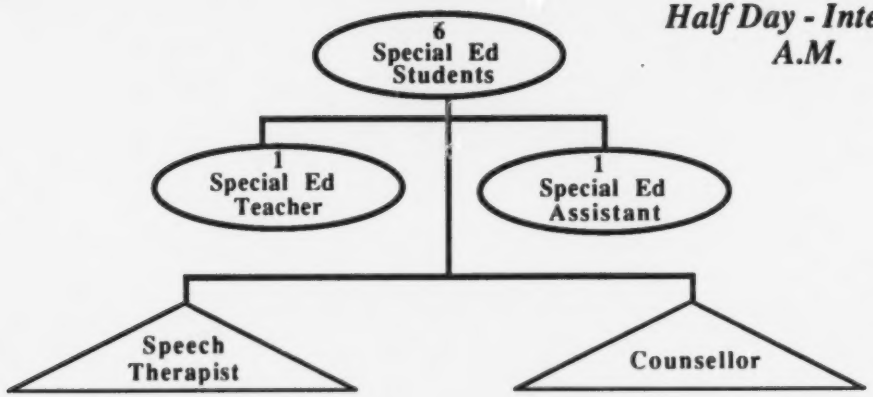




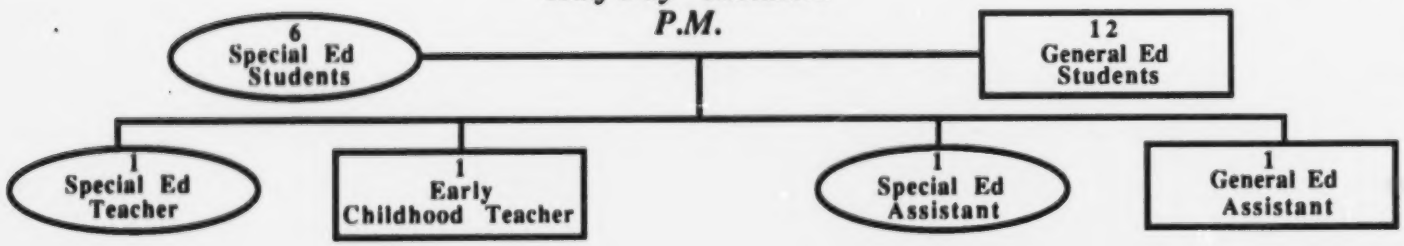
Half Day - Intensive
P.M.

Model C - Bilingual

Half Day - Intensive
A.M.



Half Day - Inclusive
P.M.



Model A - Full Day Inclusive

8:30 - 9:00	**Breakfast**
9:00 - 9:30	**Group Meeting**
9:30 - 10:30	**Learning Centers**
10:30 - 10:45	**Re-Group**
10:45 - 11:15	**Lunch**
11:15 - 11:30	**Story Time**
11:30 - 12:15	**Quiet Time**
12:15 - 1:30	**Gross Motor (3Days)/Special Projects**
1:30 - 2:00	**Re-Group**
2:00 - 2:20	**Snack**
2:20 -	**Dismissal**

Model B - Half Day Inclusive

8:30 - 9:00	Breakfast
9:00 - 9:20	Group Meeting
9:20 - 9:30	Story Time
9:30 - 10:20	Learning Centers/Special Projects
10:20 - 10:30	Re-Group (Gross Motor)
10:30 - 11:00	Lunch
11:00 -	Dismissal
	Staff Preparation and Lunch Periods
12:30 - 1:00	Lunch
1:00 - 1:20	Group Meeting
1:20 - 1:30	Story Time
1:30 - 2:30	Learning Centers/Special Projects -
	Super Start Plus Bussing
2:30 - 2:40	Re-Group
2:40 - 3:00	Snack
3:00 -	Dismissal

Model C - Monolingual-1/2 Day Inclusive

8:30 - 9:00	Breakfast	
9:00 - 9:20	Group Meeting	
9:20 - 9:30	Story Time	Mainstream Setting
9:30 - 10:30	Learning Centers/Special Projects	
10:30 - 10:45	Re-Group (Gross Motor)	
10:45 - 11:15	Lunch	
	Change Rooms/Quiet Time	
12:30 - 12:45	Everyday Living Skills	
12:45 - 1:05	Group Meeting	
1:05 - 1:45	Learning Centers/Special Project	Intensive Setting
1:45 - 2:00	Re-Group and Snack	
2:00 - 2:20	Gross Motor	
2:20 -	Dismissal	

Model C - Bilingual-1/2 Day Inclusive

8:30 - 9:00	Breakfast	
9:00 - 10:00	Group Meeting	
10:00 - 10:30	Story Time	Intensive Setting
10:30 - 10:50	Learning Centers/Special Projects	
10:50 - 11:05	Re-Group (Gross Motor)	
11:05 - 11:15	Snack	
	Change Rooms/Quiet Time	
12:30 - 1:00	Lunch	
1:00 - 1:20	Group Meeting	
1:20 - 1:30	Story Time	
1:30 - 2:30	Learning Centers/Special Project	Mainstream Setting
2:30 - 3:00	Re-Group and Snack	
3:00 -	Dismissal	

Learning Centers

• Water Table:	A child-high table, where a variety of materials are used to explore the properties of water.
• Art Center:	An area wherevarious materials are made available to students to create and explore; includes paint, glue, clay, collage, scissors, etc.
• Manipulatives Center:	A place to explorehands-on table-top toys, including; lego, objects for stringing, stacking, and sorting.
• Neighborhood Center:	An area dedicated for dress-up and dramatic play.
• Block Center:	A carpeted area for the use of larger blocks of differing shapes and sizes, as well as wooden doll houses.
• Easel:	For the upright use paint, markers, and crayons.
• Listening Center Library	A collection of picture books, and books with accompanying audio tapes.
• Science Center:	A place to study plant growth,magnifying glasses, magnets, insect development, basiclaws of physics.